

for the better; and new dream succeeds to
dream, sermon
treads on the heels of sermon, till the reader
too begins to
nod on the author's shoulder. One bold
addition, how-
ever, at the very outset confronts these
discontented sub-
jects of a dying king. It is a fable. Not,
indeed, even this,
a new fable—our author is no lover of new-
fangledness.

It is the ancient apologue of the meeting of
the rats to bell
the cat. But at least a new character
appears in it—a
mouse (suitable disguise for a poor and
timid poet), who
yet makes bold 'sternly* to warn the 'route
of ratones'
that, without the cat to check them, they
could not rule
themselves and would eat everybody else
out of house
and home. A cat they must have; and the
worse for them,
if it is only a kitten.
'Vaeterraeubipuerrexest!'¹ Then,
mouselike, the author suddenly whisks
back into his
hole—'What my fable means, you must
guess, good
readers'—'Devine ye, for I ne dar (dare not)
- bi deregod
inheveneP

He belittled either his hearers'
intelligence or his own
courage; for his mouse-Latin speaks clearly
enough. The
cat is the King. The kitten is little Richard,
his heir often.
And the mouse's moral is equally clear—
better a strong
monarchy, despite all the monarch's faults,
than the domi-
nation of that fierce and ravaging nobility
soon to anni-
hilate itself on the battlefields of the Roses.

But the poem is concerned with far more
than cats and

kings and political crises. They alone could
never have
made this unknown writer nearly as widely
read as even
Chaucer was to be*² His real theme—too big
for him, and
yet a brave attempt—is all mankind, and all
eternity. The

*Woe to the land where a child is king!

²Of P^{er}c *PlomuM* forty-seven MSS. have been
counted (nearly
as many as of the *Canterbury Tales*}; as against
sixteen of *Troiks*
and *Criseyde*.